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A FORCE FOR CONTINUITY?

Fritz W. Gmarth

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POLITICS AND POLICY IN THE BREZHNEV REGIME:

A FORCE FOR CONTINUITY? *

Fritz W. Ermarth
The Rand Corporation, Santa Monica, California

Western observers generally greeted the results of the XXIV CPSU Congress with frustration and boredom. Notwithstanding all the conventions of post-Khrushchev political life in Moscow to which we have become accustomed, one is still baffled at how such a major event in the affairs of the other superpower, faced at home and abroad with the kind of problems that bring others to the brink of hysteria, can turn out to be such an unedifying show. In its representation of the glacial pace of political developments in Moscow, the Congress was certainly an outward manifestation of continuity, without doubt a major goal of its organizers.

In one respect, however, the Congress is a watershed of which account must be taken. It signals the end of the Brezhnev-Kosygin-Podgorny triumvirate and the emergence of what is clearly a Brezhnev regime. Kollektivnost' is by no means dead, but it is now something rather different than it was at the XXIII Congress and for a good time thereafter. What we mean by this observation and what its implications for future politics and policy may be deserve some careful thought.

The Emergent Brezhnev Leadership

Limitations of space, time, and the author's resources prevent a thorough recapitulation of "Kremlinological" developments since 1964. The generally

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familiar highlights between Khrushchev's fall and the XXIV Congress probably convey an accurate picture. The arrangements that emerged from the October and November plenums of 1964 represented a meticulous balance of personal and institutional powers in the Politburo. The key role of Podgorny at the crucial November Plenum ending Khrushchev's bifurcation of the party, thereby fulfilling a vital portion of the apparat's mandate to the new leadership, indicated that Brezhnev started out very much as a pares inter pares, primus in his party title only.

But the balance was evidently too meticulous and delicate to deal with the pressures of policy and politics. In the years that followed a new balance was forged. Podgorny, an old rival of Brezhnev, was shunted out of the Secretariat. And Shelepin, over a two-year period, was divested of his key positions in the Central Committee apparatus and the Council of Ministers and also of many presumed personal supporters in party and police posts. If anyone profited from these moves, it was surely Brezhnev. But they could hardly have taken place without a firm consensus in the Politburo. One may imagine, therefore, that these changes were effected in the name of that businesslike collectivity with which the leadership had wrapped itself at the outset. Podgorny's removal from the Secretariat was probably seen as a necessary elimination from this administrative body of irrepressible personal conflict between him and Brezhnev. Suslov was probably seen as the senior secretary who would watch over Brezhnev's behavior in the Secretariat on behalf of the rest of the Politburo, not a surprising arrangement given Suslov's age, stature, and comparative lack of personal ambition. Shelepin's youth, unique political base, and evident opportunism on policy issues early made him a man to watch in any emerging succession struggle. The gradual erosion of his position was in all likelihood engineered to bolster stability at the top. Even after backing a sharp challenge of the collective leadership in June 1967, Shelepin suffered a serious setback, but was not removed from the Politburo.

By summer 1967 Brezhnev was surely primus inter pares, and very likely was so earlier, by the time of the XXIII Congress. With the firm support of Kirilenko, he had control of the Secretariat under the uncertain oversight of

Suslov. In the Politburo as a whole he shared broad powers of political initiative with only two others, Kosygin and Suslov; the first by virtue of his Premiership, foreign policy responsibilities and control of the economy; the second by virtue of his secretaryship and an ideological portfolio that gave him initiative on a broad range of domestic and international matters. The other members of the Politburo, including Podgorny, probably played roles of lobbyists and supporters.

Brezhnev's authority in this scheme was meaningfully constrained, however. He was unable to exercise policy initiative without careful attention to the other members of the Politburo. And the right combination of supporters and initiators could overrule him. He seems to have exercised his authority with considerable caution. He managed to be identified with important foreign and domestic policy initiatives without the onus of pushiness that characterized Khrushchev's rise to power. He acquired the mantle of chief steward of the collective regime, a competent generalist in policy and administration, a politician solicitous of the collective wisdom, and a man of great caution. His personal authority was probably regarded as a necessary ingredient to effective working relations in the Politburo and Secretariat, fully consistent with collectivity. This arrangement seemed tailored to satisfy the dual demands of the larger elite: on the one hand, stability of policy and politics assured by shared power at the top; on the other, the requisite decisiveness of policy and administration.

How and how much this may have changed is difficult to gauge. A key event was the December Plenum of 1969, after which Brezhnev intruded visibly into Kosygin's business. Rumors of a Suslov, Mazurov, Shelepin critique of the regime's performance in early 1970 are difficult to credit per se, but may have been a biproduct of resentment over Brezhnev's behavior or perhaps of sentiment in the elite that spurred Brezhnev to take a more vigorous role. Last summer's postponement of the Congress, two weeks after Brezhnev announced it would be held in 1970, may have been a momentary setback, or perhaps the result of developments that put Kosygin and Gosplan, long overdue with a new five-year plan, in a bad light. In any case, Brezhnev did not suffer materially, and he appears to have

been the gainer from a host of cadre shifts in the central and regional apparatus during 1970.

From events at the Congress one can only conclude that pre-Congress developments saw a major accretion of power and stature to Brezhnev. He was given warm personal praise at several republic congresses, even the controversial title "Head of the Politburo." In terms of profile and protocol, the Congress itself revealed a mild but highly visible Brezhnev personality cult. He was clearly singled out as the man to whom past success is most to be credited and who is most responsible for the future. More important, the changes in leading party organs registered by the Congress were clear, if not massive, improvements in Brezhnev's position. Of the four candidates elevated to full voting membership, two, Shcherbitsky and Kunayev, are certain Brezhnev supporters; the other two, Grishin and Kulakov, very probable supporters. The enlargement of the Politburo falls short of giving Brezhnev anything like an automatic majority. Even if one gives Brezhnev the new four plus Kirilenko, he must still go after two or three additional votes. Moreover, many Politburo sessions may find Kunayev and Shcherbitsky (also Shelest, a probable Brezhnev opponent) unable to attend, owing to their regional responsibilities.

No one has credibly described the working procedures of the modern Politburo. But there is evidence that many of its meetings address long and detailed agendas. Along with the obvious major issues, we know that many secondary, even trivial issues are discussed there. In his report to the June 1970 Plenum Brezhnev mentioned Politburo discussion of a Volga River irrigation project. If Krushchev's reminiscences are to be believed, the Politburo discussed a passport for a ballerina. This heavy work load, plus a compulsion throughout the Soviet system for unanimous agreement at the time of final decision, suggests that decisionmaking on most issues takes place well before formal votes, through an informal process of molding policy initiatives and political consensus to fit each other. Substantive policies are compromised and politicians try to sense which way the wind is blowing, preferring,

on most issues, to move with the wind. As Khrushchev said in 1957, politics is not arithmetic.

Brezhnev is certainly now in a better position to manage this informal political process. The slippage of Kosygin to third place in Brezhnev's verbal listing of the new Politburo reflects a diminution of his political authority suggested by other evidence over the past year. Podgorny's rise to second place in the list, however, is not matched by evidence of his return to earlier stature. Perhaps more important than his new power in the Politburo itself is Brezhnev's added power in the Secretariat, on which the routine work of the overburdened Politburo is heavily dependent. Four secretaries are now full Politburo members, and among them only the aging Suslov can be viewed as a restraining force on Brezhnev. Kulakov, as secretary and full Politburo member in charge of agriculture, can neutralize the power of Polyanski and Voronov. Of the lesser secretaries, perhaps only Ponomarev must be excluded from the Brezhnev machine, owing to his ties with Suslov. But he is more a high-level party civil servant than a party politician.

The implications of these cadre moves at the top were surely appreciated before they were revealed; hence they must reflect augmentation of Brezhnev's power before the Congress, a development that has yet to be fully dissected.

For all this, one nevertheless suspects there are limitations on Brezhnev's authority. A majority of Politburo members are still in many respects independent powers, and could see their interest in opposing Brezhnev. As one looks into lower echelons of the apparatus, one sees possible sources of future trouble. Brezhnev is evidently attempting to turn the turmoil in the Ukrainian organization against Sholokhov. But the latter, a full Politburo member, is still a power to be reckoned with and a possible focus of conservative anti-Brezhnev sentiment. Another source of trouble may be the Leningrad organization, traditionally an irritant to Moscow, denied representation on the Politburo for some time, and possibly affronted by the dispatch of its long-time chief Tolstikov to Peking. At the Congress, the new Leningrad obkom first secretary Romanov heaped praise on the General Secretary. However, one recalls that it was not Brezhnev, Kirilenko,

or Kapitenov who went to Leningrad last summer to install him, but Suslov.

Policy Problems

We have, in short, a Brezhnev-dominated regime, but certainly not a Brezhnev dictatorship. What does this mean for policy?

After the leadership shifts and the attendant Brezhnev mini-cult, the most important result of the Congress is its failure to set forth visible substantive policies to deal with the tasks it deemed to be vital. What press comment has hailed as a balanced policy platform can more readily be termed ambivalent or wishy-washy.

The main focus of the Congress was the national economy, on which two interdependent goals were set: raising the standard of living through increased production of consumer goods, improved services, and expanded housing; and raising factor productivity through technological modernization. The wisdom of the linkage between these two goals established by the regime can hardly be faulted. As Brezhnev argued in his main report, the Soviet economy has achieved a magnitude where it can and must pursue a diversity of goals: growth, defense, consumption, and progress in basic science and technology. In this light, one should probably refrain from drawing major political conclusions from the careful balance struck between consumer goals on one hand and recognition of the continuing cruciality of heavy industry on the other. But setting a diversity of national economic objectives only underscores the imperative of bringing the Soviet economy up to date technologically. The real crux of the new Five-Year Plan, therefore, is vnedrenie, introducing the fruits of the scientific-technological revolution into the economy, especially into industry. And Brezhnev admitted as much.

On this vital issue, however, the Congress was a monument to evasion. It was widely, in some cases no doubt gleefully, recognized that the 1965 economic reform has largely been a failure in solving the enduring problem of vnedrenie. Even had the implementation of the reform not been undermined by party, ministerial,

and central planning influences, it was in its original form too modest to spur the technological revolution in industry that the leadership would like to see. In any case, the system of disincentives that prevent managers from taking the risks of innovation did not yield to the reform.

But the spirit of the reform was one of attack, however gradual, on the management incentive structure and, if escalated, this might have brought improvements. Now the Congress has signaled a rejection of that spirit, and has endorsed instead an organizational gambit that can only be a partial solution at best, and may prove counterproductive: the industrial combine (ob'edinenie).

The aim of the industrial combine is to bring under one managerial roof enterprises that operate from a common technological base in need of common improvement, along with the research and design activity that can spur their modernization. One aim is to improve communication between innovators and producers; in this respect the combine may be a forward step. A second aim appears to be to forge an operating unit of sufficient scale that managers can cushion the adverse short run effects of technological innovation. But new positive incentives to innovate, implied by the statements of Brezhnev and Kosygin (e.g., endorsement of the Shchekino experiment), have yet to be revealed. Moreover, formation of the combine poses some serious bureaucratic problems. Descriptions of some combine experiments note that managerial consolidation has led to large layoffs of administrative personnel at the enterprise level. This prospect will surely generate managerial resistance to the combines. But if resistance is successful, the combine may mean little more than a thick new layer of bureaucracy between the enterprise and the center, a danger against which Gosplan chairman Baibakov warned. One may question whether the regime wants to take on what might amount to a broad purge of middle management at just this point.

Another sign of indecision at the top can be seen in the scarcity of information on the investment goals of the plan. The implication of Kosygin's closing comments is that major resource allocation decisions have yet to be made. He set

1 August as the date for "concretizing" the tasks of the plan, after which they would be approved by the Central Committee and the Supreme Soviet. Recent slippage in Soviet planning deadlines leads one to suspect that it may be some time before the present Five-Year Plan is officially confirmed by the Supreme Soviet. One recalls that the last one never was.

On the other major domestic issue, ideology and culture, the line hewn by Brezhnev was so scrupulously balanced that it will probably fire the combativeness of both liberal and conservative elements in Soviet society.

The foreign policy line of the Congress was similarly ambivalent. Along with cautiously avowed willingness to negotiate on basic sources of international tension and interest in improved U.S.-Soviet relations one hears repeated disturbing undertones present in Soviet discourse since the crises of 1967 and 1968: that the U.S. is becoming in the face of its defeats and troubles more aggressive and unpredictable; that the struggle of the two systems is intensifying. The sharp difference in tone between Gromyko's defense of agreements with the West and Grechko's harping on the unremitting pressures of the power competition leads one to suspect that the balance of Brezhnev's foreign policy statements stems from serious differences of view in the leadership. A Pravda leader on the international themes of the Congress failed to use the term "peaceful coexistence" once.

The Brezhnev Style

The Congress that gave the Brezhnev regime a mandate did not endorse a platform because none to speak of was offered. In this sense, at least, the leadership and its dominant member have a considerable degree of policy latitude. The growing authority of one man and an absence of firm policy commitments, never too constraining on strong Soviet leadership in any case, would seem to set the stage for more decisive political initiatives in dealing with the USSR's manifold problems. Might we not see repeated the example of Khrushchev, who set a personal stamp on Soviet policy at home and abroad well before he fully consolidated his political dominance?

Brezhnev is probably unwilling, and certainly less able, to pursue such a course. As a political personality, Brezhnev is very different from Khrushchev. While certainly a skilled political manipulator, Khrushchev built his power fundamentally on vigorously stated if erratically pursued purposes that he persuaded others to endorse. Brezhnev, on the other hand, seems more purely the apparatchik who thrives on the manipulation of organized influence and commits himself to stated purposes of power with great diffidence. The more fundamental point is, however, that these two political careers are products of very different political environments. The atomizing techniques of rule employed by Stalin gave Khrushchev an extremely fluid institutional environment in which to build his power base. Brezhnev acceded to the First Secretaryship in a much stabler institutional setting, in which the whole edifice of Soviet political bureaucracy has a clear sense of place and interest. If one man was to rise above others in the post-Khrushchev setting, it had to be a Brezhnev, a man whose forte was not really leadership at all but rather the quiet compromise of conflicting interests within a structured elite. The fate of Shelepín strongly suggests that this elite rejects the kind of energetic opportunism that promises "to get the country moving again." It wishes to live peacefully.

Brezhnev is thus not merely the creature of this setting, but its prisoner. His added authority in the leadership gives him new freedom to maneuver at the top, but perhaps only to accomplish his mandate, umpiring the conflicting interests of the establishment. He has done it well so far, and there are no obvious reasons why he should not continue to do so. The Brezhnev régime is a force for continuity because it is a creature of the demand for it. The vagueness and equivocation of the Congress on policy are the exterior attributes of a leadership style meeting this demand.

Clear policy positions draw the lines of bureaucratic battle in which Brezhnev and his colleagues surely prefer not to engage. Ambiguity allows for numerous happier solutions. It allows time for a policy consensus to jell in the leadership at its own pace; and the pace of consensus forming in the present group has been

notably slow. If policy disputes must eventually be resolved, ambiguity focuses hostilities on second echelon competitors while the leadership retains the image of wise and neutral arbiter. And, as anyone who has worked in large bureaucracies knows, policy and interest conflicts are very rarely fully resolved, even with the most energetic, farsighted leadership from above. They are endured, transformed, and superceded. Why should anyone want to pay the high price of initiative?

This image of the Brezhnev regime as a not-unwilling captive of a congealed bureaucratic system would suggest several prognoses for the next year or two. It leads one to expect no significant policy departures on major domestic issues. Bland exhortation and low-keyed tinkering with organization and reform will be the course followed in the economy. In ideology and culture the line of moderate conservatism will be continued; selective repression of dissidents will be accomplished without the visible intervention of the top. Foreign and military policy will continue to keep options open while opportunities for propaganda and diplomatic advantage are carefully exploited, a style already well exercised by Moscow in its SALT and European security performance. Brezhnev personally will enjoy -- he probably no longer has to encourage -- a steady inflation of his image as preeminent leader, but will take care that his image reflects a proper balance between individual responsibility and respect for kollektivnost'. He will probably intensify -- but not too ostentatiously -- his cultivation of a personal following in the party apparatus.

This is a prescription for the behavior of what T. H. Rigby has recently termed a self-stabilizing oligarchy. But it is too pat. Are we not too quick to discard the concepts of leadership struggle that post-Khrushchev experience appears to have discredited? It should be noted that the past seven years have been characterized by the containment, not the absence, of leadership struggle. The stability of present leadership arrangements, the apparent orderliness and gradualness of change at the top may be as much circumstantial as systemic. In June 1967 a major assault on the collective leadership was launched by Nikolai Yegorychev,

First Secretary of the Moscow gorkom, evidently with the backing of Shelepin. It failed, but one has no way of knowing how narrowly. It is all too easy to conclude that the Politburo and Central Committee readily joined ranks to prevent the boat from rocking. Yegorychev was an experienced apparatchik, well placed to gauge sentiment in higher levels of the elite. He would not have allied himself with Shelepin in an attack on the Brezhnev-Kosygin-Podgorny regime had he not sensed enough dissatisfaction to give it some hope of success.

Conflict between the most basic desires of the ruling elite, to live peacefully on one hand and to retain the dynamism and legitimizing force of mobilization politics on the other, give the self-stabilizing oligarchy an uncertain foundation. When one of its desires is satisfied in full, the elite is susceptible to appeals to the other. Fully gratifying both is impossible. The Brezhnev regime will attempt to gratify both in part, but it will be a delicate undertaking. The normal course of political life will impose strains. The advanced age and poor health of key Politburo members, e.g., Kosygin and Suslov, will sooner or later require politically significant adjustments of influence in that body, even if the departures are purely natural. Personal conflicts, e.g., between Brezhnev and Shelest, can easily boil over into policy disputes. Ambitious younger leaders in and outside the Politburo may not be willing to await the fullness of time for claiming greater power. Crises in international affairs may not allow the deliberate pace of consensus molding, so critical for stability, to be maintained. The qualified preeminence of Brezhnev so far has seemed to serve the process of balancing among the interests of the bureaucracies and the conflicting desires of the elite as a whole. But one cannot rule out the possibility that he oversteps the bounds and crystalizes an opposition.

In short, the politics of a self-stabilizing oligarchy are, like the politics of making and breaking supreme leaders, the politics of struggle. Struggles always contain the ingredients of surprise and change.